New role for slaying landmark

By Sean Piccoli
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DALLAS

With a $3.5 million makeover and the blessing of its citizens, this city is recasting its most infamous landmark in a new role.

On Feb. 22, "The Sixth Floor" will open its doors to an estimated 500,000 visitors each year who will walk its hallways, view newspaper, radio and film exhibits, linger near an assassin's perch, and hopefully leave with a clearer understanding of the tragedy that unfolded here 25 years ago.

Six seconds turned this old building at the corner of Elm and Houston streets from an aging brick storehouse into a city's badge of shame.

But, like the city itself, the Texas School Book Depository building has shown a resilience, surviving two deliberately set fires, repeated calls for its demolition — even a plan to sell its bricks as souvenirs at $1 apiece.

More importantly, it survived Lee Harvey Oswald, who killed the president from a sixth-floor window overlooking Dealey Plaza. And the building's resurgence seems to mirror Dallas' own coming to terms with the assassination.

"On the whole I'd say [in] Dallas today, the bulk of the population feel like they're the guardians of history now — despite some of the holdover bitterness," said A.C. Greene, a longtime Dallas newspaperman and now director of the University of North Texas' Center for Texas Studies.

But some still dislike what they consider the tourist pitch. "I can't understand why they want to make a museum out of it," said 41-year-old Dallas native Linda Alexander.

"It seems like they're making a mountain out of a molehill," she added. "Why publicize the fact that Dallas is where the president was killed?"

The museum's staunchest ally responded:

"I think that's a natural reaction, but I don't think that's a typical reaction," said Lindalyn Adams, president of the Dallas County Historical Foundation.

After 14 years of hand-wringing, Dallas County residents voted overwhelmingly in 1977 to buy the seven-story building for $400,000.

After a facelift that modernized the lower floors but left the top two floors vacant, the building became Dallas County's Administration Building. Last year, the foundation began its long-planned sixth-floor renovation.

The 87-year-old building — no longer the staging area for the sale and delivery of school books, with the "Hertz" sign atop it long since removed — bustles with new activity.

The sixth floor is off-limits because of the museum construction, but tourists, reporters, camera crews and county workers flit in and out on the lower floors. When the museum is complete, multimedia exhibits will trace the assassination and its aftermath, and survey various investigations and explore Mr. Kennedy's presidency.

At the southeast corner of the room, in an area dubbed "The Corner Window," the assassin's perch will be re-created exactly as it was 25 years ago today — down to the placement of book cartons as they were that fateful day.

walked into the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, dropped his passport on the table and renounced his U.S. citizenship. He spent three years in Russia and returned to the United States in 1962 with his Soviet bride, Marina. They settled in Dallas.

British author Michael H.B. Eddowes says the KGB by then controlled Oswald. The young man's movements were guided by the mysterious George DeMorenschildt, a native-born Russian living in Dallas who was said to be a CIA operative.

■ The second gunman:

Author David S. Lifton focused on another body: the president's. In his exhaustively researched and documented book "Best Evidence" (1980), he claimed Mr. Kennedy's wounds had been surgically altered to remove physical evidence that would have pointed to a second gunman and a conspiracy.

To achieve this, the president's body was shuffled from casket to casket in a bizarre shell game and somehow altered after leaving Dallas, but before a controversial autopsy at Bethesda Naval Hospital.

Mr. Lifton never names a conspirator but writes: "A sophisticated appraisal of the evidence must force one to the conclusion that there was a plot involving the executive branch of government to remove Kennedy from office and by fabricating the evidence ... make his death appear a historical quirk of fate."

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The Warren Commission staked Texas School Book Depository hit Mr. Kennedy in the neck, passed through his throat, then struck Texas Gov. John Connally — who was riding in the forward jump seat — in the back, wrist and thigh.

Another bullet missed and a third, fatal bullet struck Mr. Kennedy in the head, the commission found.

But conspiracy theorists claim witness testimony proves one shot struck Mr. Kennedy in the back and lodged there; another shot fired about one second later struck Mr. Connally; a third and possibly a fourth tore through Mr. Kennedy's brain after he had slumped into his wife's arms.

Once you accept that premise, they argue, you must reject the "single bullet theory" and conclude there were at least two gunmen, since it was physically impossible for Oswald to shoot, work the rifle bolt, aim and shoot again in just one second.

Other theories abound.

"There are a substantial number, and I don't know how you would even count," said attorney James Lesar, vice president of the Assassination Archive and Research Center in Washington. "A lot of them are very fringe and easily lend themselves to ridicule."

Josiah Thompson, a private investigator from San Francisco and author of "Six Seconds in Dallas" (1967), a detailed study which concluded three gunmen shot the president, says that in the absence of one clear train of facts, conjecture thrives.

"Nobody knows what happened. That's absolutely surreal. The most thoroughly investigated homicide of anybody in our history and we end up with no answer," he said.